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ABSTRACT

The Nevada Proficiency Examination Program was established by the Nevada State Legislature in 1977 to identify students who might require additional assistance to maintain normal academic progress through school and to serve as a minimum competency examination, insuring that each student who receives a high school diploma has met certain minimum requirements in basic skills. All students in the public schools are administered standardized tests in reading and mathematics at grades 3, 6, and 9. These tests measure each student's standing relative to a representative national sample. In 1989, the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, Fourth Edition, (CTBS) was chosen for this purpose. Knowledge of language is also assessed in grades 3 and 6 using the CTBS, and writing is assessed at grade 9 using a test developed by the Nevada Department of Education. Examinations in reading, writing, and mathematics comprise the Nevada High School Proficiency Examination that is administered as a graduation requirement in the 11th grade, with additional opportunities in grade 12 for those who do not pass on the first attempt. The content of the high school examinations is defined in the Nevada Administrative Code. Local school districts bear most of the costs involved in the testing programs. It is estimated that in the 1989-90 school year, approximately 43,500 students will be tested, at a cost of about $340,000. (SLD)

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The Nevada Proficiency Examination Program

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Introduction

The Nevada Proficiency Examination Program was established by the Nevada State Legislature in 1977. It required that:

"The board of trustees of each school district shall administer examinations in all public schools within its district to determine the proficiency of pupils in:
(a) Reading;
(b) Writing; and
(c) Mathematics.
The examinations must be administered before the completion of grades 3, 6, 9 and 12. (NRS 389.015)"

Different standards of proficiency were permitted for pupils with diagnosed learning disabilities, and failure to pass the examinations had differing consequences depending on grade level. Students who failed to pass the examination at grades 3, 6 or 9 could be promoted, but evaluation of the test results and determination of appropriate remedial study was required. Failure to pass the examination administered before completion of grade 12 meant denial of a high school diploma. A student who failed to pass the high school examination could be given a certificate of attendance, in lieu of the diploma, if he/she had reached the age of 17 years.

The State Board of Education was given the authority to prescribe which standard examinations were to be used. In addition, the disclosure of the test content or the correct answers was expressly forbidden, except as required to administer and score the test or to a state officer who required the information in the performance of his/her duties.

The following is a brief description of the program, as it exists today.

Legislative Intent

Both the language and intent of the law require that the program include two essential functions. The first is to identify students who might require additional assistance in order to maintain normal academic progress through elementary and secondary school. The second function is essentially that of a minimum competency examination, insuring that each student who receives a diploma from a Nevada public high school has met certain minimum requirements in the basic skills areas.

The Proficiency Examination Program at Grades 3, 6 and 9

In order to accomplish the first purpose, all students in the public schools are administered standardized tests in reading and mathematics at grades 3, 6 and 9. These tests are intended to measure each student's standing relative to a representative national sample of students who were tested at the same grade level and time of year. In 1989, the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, Fourth Edition (CTBS/4, CTB/McGraw Hill); levels 13, 16 and 19/20 for grades 3, 6, and 9 respectively; was adopted for this purpose. Knowledge of language (rather than writing) is assessed at grades three and six, using the CTBS, and writing is assessed at grade 9 using a test developed by the Nevada Department of Education.

Students who fail to pass these tests are evaluated and regulations adopted in 1982 require each school district to design an alternative course of study, in the subject area failed, for these students.

The results of these examinations, aggregated by school and district, are reported to the Superintendent of Public Instruction annually.

Test Content at Grades 3, 6, and 9

The content of the tests at grades 3, 6, and 9 is determined by the objectives of the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills. Those objectives match well the objectives for reading, mathematics, writing and language specified in the Nevada elementary and secondary courses of study. In addition, the CTBS was selected for its agreement with those curricula most widely used in the state of Nevada.

The reading test at grade three includes subtests of word analysis (phonics) skills, vocabulary and reading comprehension. At grades six and nine, the reading measure assesses only vocabulary and comprehension. The mathematics tests at these three grade levels assess both computation skills and knowledge of concepts and applications. The language tests at grades three and six measure knowledge of both language mechanics and expression. The writing test at grade nine requires the student to produce writing samples on two different topics. These samples are holistically scored for effectiveness of communication.

The High School Proficiency Examination

The second function of the program is fulfilled through a requirement that all students pass statewide proficiency examinations in reading, mathematics and writing before the completion of grade 12. These tests comprise the Nevada High School Proficiency Examination. This examination is administered during February of the eleventh grade and on three later occasions, during the twelfth grade, for those who fail to pass the test(s) on their first attempt. Each student must achieve a passing score in all three subject areas in order to qualify for a standard diploma upon graduation from a Nevada public high school.

These tests are scored by the State Department of Education and the results for individuals, schools, and districts are reported to the appropriate administrative bodies as well as to the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Test Content at Grades 11 and 12

The content of the Nevada High School Proficiency Examinations is detailed in the Nevada Administrative Code.

The examination in Reading assesses:

(a) Vocabulary and determining the meaning of words in context;
(b) Identifying details and main ideas in selections;
(c) Identifying the sequence of events in a selection or steps in a set of directions;
(d) Making comparisons and contrasts;
(e) Identifying causes and effects;
(f) Distinguishing between facts and opinions;
(g) Predicting outcomes and drawing conclusions based on the material read; and
(h) Understanding the author's intent.

The test in mathematics assesses skills in the following areas:

(a) Adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing whole numbers, decimals, fractions and percentages, using a single step;
(b) Adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing whole numbers, decimals, fractions and percentages, using multiple steps;
(c) Using formulas and simple equations;
(d) Solving problems involving measurement;
(e) Geometry; and
(f) Solving problems using information obtained from tables, charts, printouts, graphs, maps and scales.

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The test in writing requires the student to write on two topics chosen from the following styles of writing:

(a) Descriptive or narrative writing;
(b) Expository writing; or
(c) Persuasive writing.

The development of these measures by the Nevada Department of Education has been prescribed by the State Board of Education.

Passing Scores and Results

The minimum score required to pass each test at all grade levels is set at a level below which approximately 22 percent of a representative national sample of students would be expected to fall. In recent years, approximately 90 percent of students who have taken the tests in Nevada have demonstrated achievement at or above this level of competence, at each grade tested. In addition, most of the 10 percent of eleventh grade students who do not pass one or more examinations on their first attempt, do eventually pass the test and earn a standard high school diploma.

Program Costs

The local school districts bear the lion's share of the cost of the Nevada Proficiency Examination Program. For grades 3, 6, and 9, districts order the required tests directly from the publisher and arrange for their scoring. They then summarize those results and report them to the Superintendent of Public Instruction. For grade 9 writing and all grade 11 and 12 tests, the State Department of Education provides the tests, scores them and reports the results back to the districts. The districts are then billed for the actual cost of these materials and services and their related administrative expenses.

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It is estimated that the seventeen school districts in Nevada will spend a total of approximately $340,000 during the 1989-90 academic year to support the Nevada Proficiency Examination Program. Approximately 43,500 students in Nevada's public schools will be tested during that period. Thus, at grades 3, 6, 9, and 11, an average of $7.83 of the $3,338 per student annual expenditure goes toward support of the proficiency examination program.

Summary Data

Enabling Legislation: Nevada Revised Statutes 389.015

Governing Regulations: May be found in Nevada Administrative Code Chapter 389

Number Tested Annually (approximate):
Grade 3: 12,000
Grade 6: 10,500
Grade 9: 10,000
Grades 11 and 12: 11,000

Percentage Passing by Grade Level (approximate):
Grade 3: 90%
Grade 6: 84%
Grade 9: 87%
Grade 11: 93%

Cost Per Student by Grade Level:
Grade 3: $4.59
Grade 6: $4.06
Grade 9 and 11: $11.57

Savings realized through use of reusable booklets at grades 6 and 9, after the first year, are allocated toward district administrative expenses. The sharp increase in cost at grades 9 and 11 reflects the expense of scoring the writing examination.